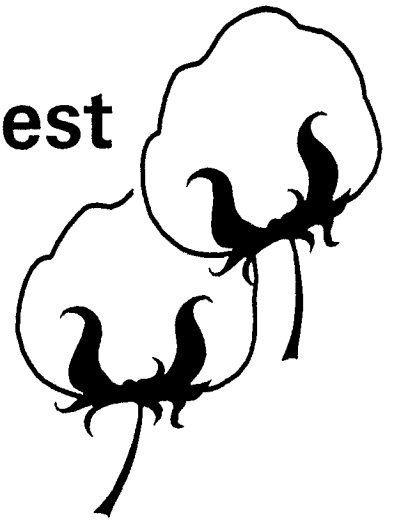


# When Cotton Isn't Best

by James McKay



As farmers in the Sacramento Valley deal with issues of pesticide, herbicide, and fungicide use, post-harvest stubble burning, water use, and commodity prices, the option of switching from rice to another crop, like cotton, will continue to influence farmer's choices.

There's plenty of debate about how far farming of cotton could creep into the Sacramento Valley, but it is generally agreed that extensive proliferation of cotton into the valley could be disastrous for waterfowl.

Cotton is a major cash crop in the San Joaquin Valley, but unlike rice, it has little or no value for waterfowl. Should cotton farming become a profitable venture in the Sacramento Valley, the most likely result would be a reduction in rice farming.

"Most of our California mallards rely on the agricultural landscape in the Sacramento Valley for habitat," California Waterfowl Association Field Programs Supervisor Dan Loughman said. "We definitely want to fight to keep agriculture duck friendly."

Pete Blake managed the Los Banos Wildlife Area in the San Joaquin Valley and is now manager at Butte Sink in the Sacramento Valley. He is very concerned about the possibility of cotton proliferating. Blake said, "We have cotton moving in to Hamilton City right now. Farmers are trying to find soils and little pockets of warm weather that will support cotton."

"In rice fields, we get wasted rice seeds, along with a good invertebrate bloom when rice is flooded, and we're getting

good use by ducks," Blake said. "If rice is decreased, where are we going to put these birds? We've about maximized the use of wildlife areas, and if we lose rice ground we'll be concentrating the birds and waiting for major problems to come, like disease."

The loss of waterfowl-friendly ground to cotton comes not only from rice being supplanted, but also because herbicides used for weed control in the rice may be forbidden. "With the first cotton in the area, there was a five-mile radius around it where herbicides could not be used," Blake said. "That's turned out to be a 'no use' rule in Butte County. Now farmers have to use another crop that can tolerate rice chemicals to buffer the cotton, so basically we're looking at even further loss of rice habitat."

How much habitat could be lost? Nobody knows, but it could be significant. Growers have talked about the possibility of planting 200,000 acres of cotton. For comparison, the Sacramento Valley has about 500,000 acres of rice. Last year, approximately 11,000 acres of cotton were produced in the Sacramento Valley.


Water resources are also an issue. If the cost of water is too high, farmers are encouraged to grow high cash crops that use less water and may be of no value to waterfowl. Even under perfect conditions, rice uses roughly five-acre feet of water. Cotton will require two to three acre-feet. Some farmers may be able to increase their profits by selling the rights to the surplus water.

Ed Smith of the California Department of Fish and Game in Fresno works amid some of the best cotton ground in the world. He agreed that cotton in the Sacramento Valley would be bad news, but said at this point it doesn't appear to be supplanting as much rice as feared.

The Sacramento Valley is on the northern edge of the growing range for cotton, and farmers are finding that the climate may affect the success of cotton crops. They may elect to use cotton as a rotational crop, although there appears to be a little better production in the western foothills than in the valley.


Loughman said the danger from cotton becomes more likely as economic conditions become more difficult for rice farmers and as new strains of cotton are developed.

Cotton is presenting new challenges to land managers seeking wildlife-friendly methods of farming. There is a human factor that provides some optimism. "In my visits to many rice growers, I've learned that most of them are into rice farming for a lot more than the bottom line; they get a kick out of providing waterfowl and other birds with habitat and seeing the masses of birds supported by their practices," said Loughman. "That may well influence their decisions on crop conversion. But for other guys farming is a business, and those are the growers we're worried about."

CWA is quite concerned about the potential impact that cotton might have since staff biologists are unaware of waterfowl-friendly management techniques. The association will remain vigilant on this issue. 

*The author is a free lance writer in Sacramento.*

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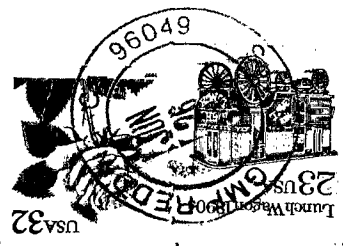
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Neil Evans  
1138 Deetz Rd.  
Mt. Shasta, CA 96067

CALFED Bay Delta Program  
1416 Ninth Street, Suite 1155  
Sacramento, CA 95814

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